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# The *Économie des Conventions* – Transdisciplinary Discussions and Perspectives. Introduction to the HSR Focus

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**Abstract:** »Die *économie des conventions* – transdisziplinäre Diskussionen und Perspektiven. Einleitung in den HSR-Focus«. The *économie des conventions* (economics of convention, EC) has developed in the last three decades in France as an approach for economic history, economic sociology and pragmatic institutionalism. For some years now the international reception and recognition has started. The introduction to the HSR Focus frames the collected contributions. Therein the ongoing discussion about the application of EC in transdisciplinary historical analysis is presented. A focal point for the current debate has been a workshop in February 10th 2012 (at Humboldt University Berlin). The workshop is initially presented. Then the contributions of this focus are introduced. The contributions forward the discussion but they also present new work on conceptual and methodological issues of EC. The impact of materialities, the importance of power and critique, the role of cognition for the pragmatic institutionalism and the analysis of quantification and the difference between the notions of institution and conventions are elaborated. At the end the specificities of the German reception of EC are sketched. All in all, the focus is more than a presentation of ongoing discussion: it offers insights into new transdisciplinary perspectives.

**Keywords:** conventions, economics of convention, institutionalism, cognition, transdisciplinarity.

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## 1. Introduction

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The French approach of the economics of convention (*économie des conventions*, in short EC) has been developed in France since the 1980s. From its beginnings it was transdisciplinary – combining economic, social and historical perspectives in the analysis of economic coordination and institutions. The international recognition of this innovative approach started in the last ten

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years. Nowadays EC is established as a heterodox approach in institutional analysis and economic history.<sup>1</sup> In 2011 the special issue of *Historical Social Research* “Conventions and institutions from a historical perspective” (HSR 36.4) presented research contributions of EC in the field of historical analysis as well as contributions reflecting the application of EC to historical phenomena. The HSR 36.4 gathered contributions from scholars from France, Belgium, Switzerland and Germany. Some of the founders of EC participated as well as younger scholars from different disciplines.<sup>2</sup> The special issue was one of the first English written presentations of EC in the field of historical analysis and economic history.<sup>3</sup> The special issue HSR 36.4 was published in October 2011. To introduce and discuss it, the editors organized a workshop. The organization was supported by the Centre Marc Bloch (Humboldt University Berlin), Rework (Humboldt University Berlin) and the laboratoire “Institutions et dynamiques historiques de l’économie” (Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan/Paris) and held at 10th of February 2012 in Berlin. The contributions of this HSR Focus present contributions discussing the workshop and continuing the application of EC in historical analysis.

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## 2. The Workshop

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The workshop was labeled (as the special issue) as “Conventions and institutions from a historical perspective”.<sup>4</sup> The presentations and discussions of the contributions of HSR 36.4 were grouped in three sessions. For each session one discussant and one chair was invited. Sigrid Quack (Cologne), Alessandro Stanziani (Paris), Alexander Nützenadel (Berlin) participated as discussants. Denis Thouard (Berlin), Noel Whiteside (Warwick) and Christian Bessy (Paris) participated as chairs for the discussions. Michael Hutter (Berlin) chaired the final round table with the contributors. All individual contributions of HSR 36.4 were discussed and the discussions in the course of the workshop thereby repeatedly focused the following main topics:

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<sup>1</sup> See for a more extended introduction into EC and its position in the field of institutional approaches Diaz-Bone and Salais (2011).

<sup>2</sup> The contributors were Bert De Munck (Antwerp), Alain Desrosières (Paris), Rainer Diaz-Bone (Lucerne), Georges Hanne and Claire Judde de Larivière (Toulouse), Christof Jeggli (Bamberg), Jürgen Kädtler (Göttingen), Philippe Minard (Paris), Robert Salais (Paris), and Laurent Thévenot (Paris).

<sup>3</sup> In France Bernard Lepetit (1995) was one of the first historians to discuss EC in the context of historical sciences. See therefore the contribution of Laurent Thévenot (in this volume). See also Jeggli (2011). In Germany Jürgen Kocka pointed towards a more intensified cooperation between EC and historians.

<sup>4</sup> The workshop was attended by up to 60 scholars coming from Germany, France, Austria, Switzerland, England, Brazil and Belgium.

- applications of EC to historical analysis (dedicated to special topics as leather market, linen production, occupational labels and others);
- reflections about the historical emergence, stabilization and dynamic of conventions;
- the relation of conventions and institutions in historical and theoretical perspective;
- methodological strategies to identify and analyze conventions (explanatory power of the EC approach, questions of meaning and understanding of conventions);
- problems, developments and perspectives of the transdisciplinary, EC-based research in economic history.

The contributions in this focus present and continue the debate about these topics.

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### 3. Contributions to the HSR Focus

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All active participants of the workshop were invited to comment the workshop discussion or to continue the introduction of this approach to historical analysis. In sum we present seven contributions.

*Christian Bessy* (Paris) reviews most of the contributions of HSR 36.4 and he picks up some of the arguments from the workshop. He is now internationally well known as an innovative representative of EC – especially in the domain of institutional theory (Bessy 2002, 2011).<sup>5</sup> Bessy sketches innovative contributions to institutional theory and perspectives for further development mentioning the analysis of the dynamics of convention and the integration of expert's capabilities. We want to highlight his critical remark about our position to the economic institutionalism, which we worked out in the introduction to HSR 36.4 (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011). Bessy refers to North and Knight (2007), arguing that economic institutionalism nowadays has integrated an adequate notion of cognition. *Laurent Thévenot* (Paris) reconsiders the roads for the historians towards a broader recognition of EC: He opens up the discussion how to integrate power, critique and the (material) environment into historical analysis. As Bessy does, Thévenot evaluates some of the contributions in HSR 36.4 for the further development of EC. His contribution can also be conceived as a renewed invitation to the field of historians to apply EC in historical analysis. *Jürgen Kädler* (Göttingen) reviews the specific character and the specific capabilities of the EC. He starts arguing that there is no such thing as a “catch all theory in social sciences”. To the complex relationship of conventions and institutions he adds the problems of uncertainty and of power. He demonstrates

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<sup>5</sup> See for systematic presentations Salais (1998), Bessy and Favereau (2003).

how EC can be enhanced this way and he applies his “completion” to the analysis of the process of financialisation – thereby continuing his contribution to HSR 36.4 (Kädtler 2011). As *Bert De Munck* (Antwerp) argues, the analysis of materiality and of long term transitions is not well elaborated in EC. Therefore he proposes to combine EC with other approaches such as the actor-network theory. In his contribution *Robert Salais* (Paris) relates EC to the research on the social processes of quantification. The analysis of quantification is part of the origins of EC. Salais claims research should focus on the relationship between generalizing the market, transforming the state and changing the role and status of quantification. *Rainer Diaz-Bone* (Lucerne) discusses the notion of institution in economic and sociological neo-institutionalism. He proposes to distinguish different forms of relations between institutions and conventions to identify different types of perceived situations for institutional analysis. The article written by *Claire Judde de Larivière* (Toulouse) introduces an additional empirical study about the organization of the “public galleys expeditions” in ancient Venice. She applies the idea of “the moral economy of the poor” (developed by Edward Thompson) to the analysis of the moral economy of the rich. She identifies a common convention, existing in Venice and making public-private forms of collective economic cooperation possible. *Judde de Larivière* sketches out this convention and portrays also its decline in later centuries.

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#### 4. Prospects

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In recent years the journal *Historical Social Research* has become a forum for the international reception of EC.<sup>6</sup> After HSR 36.4 was released in 2011 this focus continues this process. It is planned to publish another HSR-special issue focusing the relation of conventions and law from a historical perspective (Diaz-Bone, Didry and Salais forthcoming). The character of the reception (and of the contributions in HSR) documents in particular the growing interest in the German speaking countries. This reception started later than the reception in the English speaking countries. But in the US, reception concentrates on the translation of “De la justification”, which was published in France the first time in 1987 (Boltanski and Thévenot 1987, reprinted as Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) and published in the US as “On Justification: Economies of worth” in 2006 – almost twenty years later (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). The German reception is different in one important aspect from the reception in the US – as the workshop and the publications in different issues of HSR demonstrate. The now intensified French-German exchange leads in the German disciplines of

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Diaz-Bone (2009).

historical analysis and economic history to a more adequate perspective of new French social sciences, which cannot be reduced to the – although important and highly influential – model presented by Boltanski and Thévenot in their influential book which was also translated into German (Boltanski and Thévenot 2007).<sup>7</sup> Instead the German reception and discussion started to recognize that this book is part of a broader scientific movement where EC is part of its core (Diaz-Bone and Thévenot 2010). The workshop was attended by many young German scholars who started to apply EC in their historical, economic or sociological research. We expect the German scholars to intensify their innovative contributions to EC-based research in the next years. This HSR Focus may be another resource for it.

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<sup>7</sup> See for more details the contribution of Thévenot in this issue.

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